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ABSTRACT

This module provides a framework for designing a functional curriculum for students with disabilities. Topics addressed include designing and using a functional curriculum, analyzing student needs, and conducting job analysis. A list of 14 references is included, and examples of forms are provided. The guide includes a list of definitions and uses a question-and-answer format to provide information on the types of students who need a functional curriculum, specific skills to be taught, adaptation of the present curriculum, and individualized instruction. (KC)

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DESIGNING A FUNCTIONAL CURRICULUM FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

University of Missouri
401 E. Stewart Road
Columbia, MO 65211
(800) 392-0533 (in Missouri only)
(314) 882-2733

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Abstract: This module provides a framework for designing a functional curriculum. Questions are addressed regarding the design and use of a functional curriculum, analyzing student needs as well as conducting job analyses. A listing of some current functional curriculum references as well as examples of materials is also included.

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Overview

Over the past twenty to thirty years, special educators have made modifications and adaptations to the regular curricular offerings of the school system. These changes have been prompted by student lack of success with the regular curriculum. Perhaps in reality, it was not so much student lack of success, but rather a curriculum which did not allow for success for some students. Though adaptations and modifications have resulted in methods that allow students to acquire knowledge sufficient to meet some of the requirements of the educational setting, a large number of students have not been prepared for tasks needed for immediate and future success. A functional curriculum is one which prepares students for today and tomorrow. Required curriculum components may teach some students specific skills to prepare them for tomorrow. This same curriculum, however, may not meet the needs of some students with disabilities. The teacher is the key in determining what curricular changes need to take place. This is accomplished by considering a more functional curriculum and asking what skills a student is able to learn and what the student needs to know for immediate and future success *(Cohen, 1990)*.

> "To attempt too broad a scope of learnings renders all learning trivial, because the learning process involves memory and recall, rather than experiences that contribute to true mastery of an idea or skill. Necessarily coverage takes precedence over mastery in this kind of approach. Much is touched upon, but little in the way of significant engagement takes place" *(Comfort, 1990, p. 399)*.

Over the years, educators have accepted a more developmental curriculum. This type of curriculum assumes that everyone develops at approximately the same pace and along the same path. A wide variance in achievement test scores along with the increased dropout rate should be clear indicators to professionals in the field of education that curriculum based on developmental stages does not meet the needs of all learners. Recent reports *(Cohen, 1990; West, 1989)* have indicated a renewed interest in and need for functional curriculum for all students with disabilities at all grade levels. This module will explore some of the considerations in designing a functional curriculum.

Definitions

Curriculum	"The plans made for guiding learning . . . and the implementation of those plans . . . " *(Glatthorn, 1987, p. 4)*.
Ecological Inventory	A process of evaluating a student in relationship to a variety of environments including the classroom, the home, the community, instructional techniques, reinforcement systems, subject matter, materials, tasks, and so forth *(Witt, Elliott, Gresham, & Kramer, 1988)*.

Functional Curricula	A curricula in which students learn functional skills in the most appropriate setting for specific skill acquisition.
Functional Activities	Instructional programs that involve skills of immediate usefulness to students and employ teaching materials which are real. Activities center on small groups or individuals. The activities often include teams of teachers guiding students through active participation.
Functional Skills	The variety of skills which are frequently demanded in natural domestic, vocational, and community environments. Non-functional skills are those which have an extremely low probability of being required by daily activities. Functional skills are built around real life experiences. The skills involve cooperation between students and teachers in the planning of learning experiences.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. **What is functional curriculum?**

A. Functional curriculum is one in which students learn functional skills in the most appropriate setting for specific skill acquisition. It is one which prepares students for their immediate and future needs. A functional curriculum embeds instruction in natural routines *(Neel & Billingsley, 1989).* It involves not only the skills, but the context and cues which occur in the natural environment or activity. The characteristics of a functional curriculum are that the skills to be taught are age-appropriate, community referenced, future oriented, and comprehensive.

Q. **How long will it take to design a functional curriculum?**

A. Designing a functional curriculum is an ongoing process. Educators must keep in mind that functional curriculum is not just a product, but a process that changes as students change.

Q. **What is the purpose of a functional curriculum?**

A. The main purpose of a functional curriculum is to prepare students to participate more fully in society with a greater degree of success both during the school years as well as in adulthood.

Q. Why should I utilize a functional curriculum?

A. There are a number of reasons to utilize a functional curriculum.

1. The "back to basics" movement does not attend to occupational competencies. If we are going to prepare students for the real world, we must start before they get to the real world on their own. We need to utilize functional settings to teach functional skills.
2. Functional curriculum enhances transfer or generalization of basic skills from the classroom to more natural environments. A functional curriculum includes practice in a variety of other appropriate settings and with other supervisors to ensure students can use skills in the natural environment that they learned in class.
3. The traditional developmental education may not be appropriate for every student. Education should not be planned on the basis of category or label, but rather on the individual needs of the students.
4. Persons with disabilities have reported they wished their education had better prepared them for the future. Functional curriculum may better ensure a smooth transition from school to the world of work and independent living.

Q. What are the major differences in a functional versus regular curriculum offered in schools?

A. A functional curriculum may teach some of the same skills as those being taught in regular classroom settings. The major differences are found in determining which skills to teach in what environments.

In special education programs, the curriculum being utilized is often based on achievement tests. Because students in these programs are functioning below grade level, it is not uncommon to find students working on materials substantially below their age level. When the materials required to teach skills are below a student's age level, it is quite appropriate to utilize functional tasks to teach the skills. Functional tasks should be considered for the curriculum content as opposed to utilizing a below age-level workbook. These workbooks frequently are not only repetitious of previous attempts made by the student, but demeaning as well. A functional curriculum is an age-appropriate curriculum.

The skills to be taught are functional if they are identified as a need of the student as opposed to meeting the curricular needs. These skills would then be taught in the most natural environment. The cafeteria, the community, the playground, the home or the classroom might be some of the environments to be utilized.

Q. What type of students need a functional curriculum?

A. All students need to have portions of their curriculum taught so they can function in a number of environments. Some students possess the skills necessary to generalize information and self-teach based on the information given to them in the classroom. For those students who have difficulty making those generalizations, a functional curriculum may need to be developed. Students who most often need a functional curriculum include those who have:

- moderate to severe disabilities,
- mild learning disabilities,
- physical impairments,
- deafness,
- blindness,
- severe speech/language impairments, and
- been identified as potential dropouts.

Functional curriculum is appropriate for any student who needs another way of learning in order to apply skills in the real world. For years, vocational education has provided students with such an education. In some vocational programs, however, the concept of developmental levels has found its way into texts--thus reducing the functional nature of the skills being taught. Laboratory or shop opportunities associated with vocational education ensures a certain level of functionality.

Students who report they are "bored" with school, need to be offered a functional curriculum. When the skills being taught are determined by the student as useful in his/her everyday life, they are often acquired and later used in adult situations. This group of students (often referred to as "at-risk") may greatly benefit from a functional curriculum.

Q. What components should be incorporated into a functional curriculum?

A. When developing a functional curriculum or adapting the current curriculum to become more functional, the following components should be found within the current plan:

- Functional Academics
- Independent Living Skills
- Community Living Skills
- Health and Grooming Skills
- Social Skills
- Leisure Skills
- Communication Skills
- Employability and Study Skills

- Community Accessibility/Mobility
- Vocational Competencies (VIMS)
- Work Adjustment
- Student Job Match

(See Job Bank, Job Analysis, and Student Match forms.)

Q. **Is a functional curriculum appropriate for secondary or elementary students?**

A. Both elementary and secondary students should be taught skills that are future oriented, community referenced, and comprehensive (i.e., functional). Preparing for adult situations may encompass many years of training for some students. Ensuring that the curriculum is functional during the elementary grades will enable the student to achieve greater success in the secondary setting where higher level functional skills may be taught.

Q. **How are the specific skills which need to be taught identified?**

A. Designing a functional curriculum begins in the same fashion as designing other curricula. One begins with skill assessment. Developmental curriculum relies on achievement testing to determine where the student is functioning. Functional curriculum assesses the student's skills and need for skills through an ecological assessment. Students are assessed by their teachers and parents through surveys, interviews, and observations in a number of settings. An ecological assessment helps guide the selection of skills for assessment, and to then match instruction in the educational program to the expectations of society. An ecological assessment enhances the social validity of the assessment *(Browder, 1987).*

The assessment process begins by determining the natural environments the student is expected to function in currently as well as those environments the student will be expected to function in as an adult. One place to begin might be the school setting. The student's performance should be observed by each of his/her teachers. Observation information gathered should report areas such as:

- the student's personal space, classroom size, and organization;
- the number of personnel and peers in the facility;
- methods the student uses to process and respond to information;
- reinforcement techniques that work;
- tasks performed (both academic and interpersonal); and
- materials utilized.

Surveys and observations made by both the parent(s) and teachers should result in more specific information regarding the student's home and community environments, and his/her reactions in those settings. It is important to ascertain:

- the amount of time spent in play (alone or with others);
- the type of activities selected;
- the frequency with which the activities take place;
- problems occurring when utilizing public facilities (such as parks, libraries, churches, grocery stores, etc.);
- time of day/week when activities occur;
- likes and dislikes of child;
- communication skills (asking for needs/desires, refusing an activity, initiating contact or conversation with persons, etc.);
- ways the child handles change; and
- skills the child can perform independently (such as mobility, independent functioning, etc.).

Gathering this type of data from the home, the school, and the community allows the multidisciplinary team to meet with the parents and the student to utilize their expertise regarding the child and to plan appropriate programs to prepare for immediate and future needs.

Q. **How can priorities be established among skill areas to be taught?**

A. To determine what priorities need to be utilized when developing skill areas, the following types of questions should be asked:

1. What skills need to be taught?
   a. Are the skills functional for the individual student?
   b. Will the skills result in normalization for the student?
   c. What are the skill/task characteristics?
2. How will the skills be taught?
3. Where should the skills be taught?

(Falvey, 1989)

In order to determine if a skill is functional, simply ask, "If this task is not learned, will someone else have to do it for this person?" If the answer is yes, it is probably a functional skill. Depending on the student's level of functioning, these skills may vary greatly.

Q. What adaptations can be made to my present curriculum to make it more functional?

A. If the present curriculum includes teaching tasks in the natural environment or routine of daily events, the curriculum may be quite functional in nature. To adapt a curriculum to become more functional, it is important to consider the following.

a. Assess your present curriculum and materials based on student needs.
b. Evaluate where you want to go with the curriculum--or better yet where it will take the student in his/her future. Is the curriculum going to prepare the student for the future or simply for passing competencies required for graduation?
c. Consider likely environments in which the student will be expected to interact as an adult. Assess skills needed for each environment and teach those skills. Obviously the student's level of functioning will determine how involved this might become.
d. Examine where the skills are being taught. Are they taught in the place where they would most frequently be used in real life situations? To what extent can you adjust this factor?
e. Examine the skills and tasks to determine if they are age appropriate. An 8th grade student who performs math at the 4.2 grade level, may not benefit from the use of a fourth grade math book. Math as well as other academic skills should be taught through activity oriented (functional) tasks.
f. Examine each unit of study or the overall curriculum and determine if a variety of learning strategies are utilized to allow students to process information in their mode of learning.
g. Examine each lesson to determine what motivating factors have been included.
h. Assess the effectiveness of the plan and make changes.

(Adapted from: Bender & Valletutti, 1982)

Q. How can I prepare a student for graduation if I use a functional curriculum as opposed to the curriculum required by the school district?

A. The curriculum utilized should be connected to adult paths of experience, especially for students with special needs. A careful examination of the needs of all students within the school district should be made with recommendations offered to curriculum committees regarding those needs. If the current curriculum does not meet those needs, it is in the best interest of the district to provide a flexible, functional curriculum. When students are prepared to function in adult environments through actual experiences in the educational process, then many of the real needs of the students are being met.

Q. **In order to individualize for each student, what must be considered?**

A. Flexible staff assignments are important when providing a functional curriculum. This flexibility may be accommodated by allowing teachers to "share" caseloads so one teacher can go into the community with students while the other stays in the classroom or school setting. Paraprofessionals may also be assigned to flexible schedules. Flexibility is also necessary to allow skills to be taught at the appropriate times of day or night. If skills need to be acquired in a natural environment, it may be necessary for instruction to occur before or after school hours. Some of this instruction may be provided by the parent(s), while some may need to be in the presence of peers and/or the teacher.

Q. **What other persons or agencies are involved in planning and managing a functional curriculum?**

A. When planning a functional curriculum, educators must include the following:

- parents;
- community personnel (employers, employees, agency representatives, etc.);
- career/vocational education personnel; and
- adult educators.

It is important to encourage parent involvement. Parental input is a major source of information in the functional curriculum. Some of the functional tasks may be best taught by the parents in the home. Teachers may work with the parent(s) to analyze the tasks and help determine the specific steps to teach it.

Selection of appropriate community environments is an essential part of the functional curriculum. The community environment to be utilized needs to be determined in advance of taking students out. Success often hinges on honest appraisal and awareness of community settings through the ecological inventory. Ensuring that employees will react naturally to the student(s) may provide greater opportunities for functional training.

Career and vocational curriculum must utilize functional methods when teaching skills for job seeking and keeping as well as job training. A functional curriculum at the secondary level may very well include job placement of students with disabilities based on their needs as well as the needs of the community. Community needs can be obtained by conducting job analyses. The skills identified through that analysis process may become the basis for the functional curriculum for some students preparing for the world of work while still in the secondary setting.

Adult education programs should provide an avenue of ongoing education for students with disabilities who may develop needs as they interact with the adult world. A part of the functional curriculum should entail enlisting adult education professionals in providing such services.

Q. **What curricula is currently on the market which might be utilized as a reference for designing a functional curriculum?**

A. Missouri LINC recently (1989) completed Functional Curriculum for Transition: A Resource Guide. This guide provides a framework for designing a functional curriculum. Educators must always be alert to the fact that functional curriculum is something you do, not something you use. Though a number of materials have been developed to enable that process, we must not lose sight of the fact that curriculum is made functional by teaching skills in the most appropriate setting for specific skill acquisition and at an appropriate age level. A listing of some materials currently on the market which are designed to guide educators wishing to "functionalize" the curriculum is attached (see Functional Curriculum References).

Q. **My district does not have funds to buy new equipment or materials, so how can I implement a functional curriculum?**

A. The beauty of a truly functional curriculum is that few, if any, new materials are needed. Those basic items used in our everyday lives are the materials to be used in a functional curriculum. Examples include such items as:

- washer
- dryer
- toaster
- hoe
- rake
- ironing board & iron
- tape measure
- wallet
- menus
- barbecue grill
- newspaper
- vending machines
- clothing
- vacuum and broom
- dishes
- soap
- make-up
- stapler
- public transportation systems
- and so forth

JOB ANALYSIS FORM

Business Name: _____ **Job Title:** _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ **Number Employed:** _____

Person Interviewed: _____ **Position:** _____

Interviewer: _____ **Date of Interview** _____

1. <u>Qualifications</u>

Age: Minimum _____ **Maximum** _____

General Education: **Elementary** _____ **High School** _____
Courses _____
Courses _____

Academic Skills:

Language:	**Must be a strength?**	**Yes** ____	**No** ____
Reading:	**Must be a strength?**	**Yes** ____	**No** ____
Writing:	**Must be a strength?**	**Yes** ____	**No** ____
Math:	**Must be a strength?**	**Yes** ____	**No** ____

Vocational Education Training Courses: _____

Apprenticeship: _____

Inplant Training: _____

On-the-Job Training: _____

Experience Required: _____

Licenses, Certificates, etc.: _____

Tests given: _____

Union: Open ____ **Required? Yes** _____ **No** _____ **Fees/Dues:** _____

Physical Requirements:

Medical Examination: Yes ____ **No** _____ **Comments:** _____

_____

Hearing (perceiving nature of sounds by ear)
Exceptional _____ Average _____ Not important to the job _____
Comment: _____

Talking (expressing or exchanging ideas by means of spoken word)
Essential _____ Average _____ Not important to the job _____
Comment: _____

Seeing (perceiving nature of objects by the eye: acuity far; acuity near; depth perception)
Essential _____ Average _____ Not important to the job _____

Strength:

_____ Sedentary Work (lifting 10# maximum)

_____ Medium Work (lifting 50# max with frequent lifting and/or carrying objects weighing up to 25#)

_____ Heavy Work (lifting 100# max with frequent lifting and/or carrying objects up to 50#)

_____ Very Heavy Work (lifting objects in excess of 100# with frequent lifting and/or carrying of objects up to 50#)

Climbing and/or balancing: _____

Stooping, kneeling, crouching, and/or crawling: _____

_____

Reaching, handling, fingering, feeling: _____

_____

Manual Skills Required:

Manual dexterity: _____

Finger dexterity: _____

Specific abilities/skills required (e.g. paying attention to detail, reading blueprints, size and or color discrimination, eye-hand coordination, etc.): _____

_____

_____

_____

2. Working Conditions

Wages: Beginning pay _____ Pay period _____ Overtime _____

Raise potential _____

Hours: Amount: _____ **Work schedule:** _____

Job Stability: Temporary _____ **Permanent** _____ **Seasonal** _____

Benefits: Vacation _____

Illness: _____ **Medical Insurance:** _____

Pension: _____ **Temperature:** _____

Working Environment:

Inside/out: _____ **Noise Level:** _____

Wet &/or Humid: _____ **Temperature:** _____

Fumes/odors: _____

Amount of Supervision: _____

Employee Interaction: Works alone _____ **With a group** _____

Promotion possibilities:

From _____ **To** _____

3. **Job Tasks:**

Materials and products to be used:

Description of Job Tasks:

Adapted from: Pruitt, W.A. (1983). Work adjustment. Stout, WI: Walt Pruitt Associates.

JOB BANK

Business/Company Name _____

Address _____

Contact Person(s) _____ Phone _____

Job Title(s)	No. of employees	Full/Part-Time Temporarly/Permanent	Pay Range

This employer has expressed an interest in hiring people with disabilities _____.
(date)

This employer wants someone who:

1. Has vocational training _____ Yes _____ No
   in _____ area.
2. Has previous job experience _____ Yes _____ No
   in _____ area.
3. Demonstrates skills or special abilities in _____
   _____ area(s).
4. Is physically strong: _____ Yes _____ No
5. Catches on to a job quickly: _____ Yes _____ No
6. Demonstrates the following personal qualifications: _____
   _____
   _____

7. Expresses an interest in: _____

_____

_____

_____

8. Has future goals of: _____

_____

_____

_____

9. Potential job opportunities now, later in the year, five years later:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

This business offers the following:

_____ Raise Policy

_____ Benefits

_____Promotion Plan

_____ On-The-Job Training

_____ Apprenticeships

Student Job Match Form

Student's Name_____ Age _____

Disability _____

Vocational Training/Program:

Job Experience(s):

Special Abilities/Skills:

Personal Qualities:

Areas of Interest	Future Goals
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Has own transportation: ____ Yes ____ No

Rides city bus: ____ Yes ____ No

Can work in _____ area of city.

Available for work _____ to _____ on _____
(time) (time) (days)

beginning _____.
(date)

Needs starting salary of $ _____.

Connections between student and the following need to be made to aid in his/her transition. (Examples: DVR, DMH, etc.)

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

FUNCTIONAL CURRICULUM REFERENCES

	Assessment	Personal-Social Interaction	Daily Living Skills	Recreation/Leisure Skills	Vocational/Occupational Guidance and Preparation	Resources (Community, Family)	Motor Skills	Mobility	Communication	Functional Academics	Independent Living	Consumer/Citizen
Bender, M. & Valletutti, P.J. (1982). Teaching functional academics: A curriculum guide for adolescents and adults with learning disabilities.	X		X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X
Brolin, D. (1978). Life centered career education: A competency based approach.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Falvey, M. (1989). Community-based curriculum: Instructional strategies for students with severe handicaps.	X		X	X	X		X	X	X			X
Ford, A., Schnorr, R., Meyer, L., Davern, L., Black, J. & Dempsey, P. (1989). The Syracuse community-referenced curriculum guide for students with moderate and severe disabilities.	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Goldstein, A., Sprafkin, R., Gershaw, N. & Klein, P. (1980). Skillstreaming the adolescent: A structured learning approach to teaching prosocial skills.		X							X			
Neel, R.S. & Billingsley, F.F. (1989). IMPACT: A functional curriculum handbook for students with moderate to severe disabilities.	X	X	X	X		X		X	X		X	X
Pancsofar, E. & Blackwell, R. (1986). A users guide to community entry for severly handicapped.	X		X			X				X	X	X
Valletutti, P.J. & Bender, M. (1982). Teaching interpersonal and community living skills.	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Wehman, P., Renzaglia, A. & Bates, P. (1985). Functional living skills for moderately and severly handicapped individuals.		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Weisgerber, R.A. (1989). Social competence and employability skills curriculum.		X							X			
West, L. (1989). Funtional curriculum for transition: A resource guide.		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wilcox, B. & Bellamy, G.T. (1982). Design of high school programs for severely handicapping students.		X	X	X	X						X	

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Valletutti, P., & Bender, M. (1982). Teaching interpersonal and community living skills: A curriculum model for handicapped adolescents and adults. Baltimore, MD: University Park.

Wehman, P., Renzaglia, A., & Bates, P. (1985). Functional living skills for moderately and severely handicapped individuals. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Weisgerber, R. A. (1989). Social competence and employability skills curriculum. Rockville, MD: Aspen.

West, L. (1989). Functional curriculum for transition: A resource guide. Columbia, MO: Instructional Materials Laboratory.

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